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Sociolinguistic Variation and Second Language Acquisition: A Preliminary Study of Advanced Learners of French[1]

Abstract

The study of a range of sociolinguistic variables in second language acquisition research has allowed a number of trends to be identified concerning the acquisition of sociolinguistic variation by the L2 learner. Based on quantitative analyses, this article considers such trends in relation to the variable use of the liaison in French interlanguage by a group of classroom learners in Ireland. Whilst use of the obligatory liaison poses less difficulty to the learners, findings point to the considerable acquisitional difficulty that use of the variable liaison poses: in a range of syntactic contexts, the learners greatly underuse the liaison which constitutes the formal variant of this variable. In so doing, the learners' overuse of the informal variant, that is to say, non-use of the liaison, contrasts sharply with previous findings for other sociolinguistic variables where overuse of formal variants is seen to dominate in learner language. The results are discussed in relation to potential acquisitional and pedagogic reasons for such discrepancies in findings.

1. Introduction

As noted by Mougeon et al. (2002), the traditional focus of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research has been on the second language (L2) learner's acquisition of features of the target language which are typically considered to be categorical as opposed to variable. Categorical features are those that are not generally considered to be subject to linguistic variation in the native speaker, although that is not to say that they are not subject to variation in the L2 learner's language use, as exemplified respectively in the following examples concerning the marking of gender (1), number (2), and tense (3) in French:

(1)   *le manuscrit*   *v. la manuscrit**
       the-masc manuscript   v. the-fem manuscript
       'the manuscript'

(2)   *deux journaux*   *v. deux journal**
       two newspapers-plur   v. two newspaper-sing
       'two newspapers'

(3)   *hier   je suis allée   à Paris v. hier   je vais   à Paris**
       yesterday I aux   go-perf to Paris v. yesterday I go-pres   to Paris
       'yesterday I went to Paris'

Whilst the variable use of such categorical features by the L2 learner has been relatively well investigated, the acquisition of native speaker variation has only more recently emerged to properly establish itself as an area of investigation, although early studies do exist such as Adamson and Regan (1991).[2] Such variable features concern the use of two or more markers to express the same meaning, such as in the case of the variable marking of negation (4) and person (5) / (6) in native speaker French:

(4)   *je ne   viens   pas   v. je viens   pas*
       I neg   come-pres neg   v. I come-pres neg
       'I am not coming'

(5)   *tu   veux   du   vin? v. vous   voulez   du vin?*
       you-informal want-pres some wine v. you-formal want-pres some wine
       'do you want some wine?'

(6)   *nous   partons tout de suite v. on   part tout de suite*
       we-informal   leave   immediately   v. we-formal leave immediately
       'we are leaving immediately'

As studies of the native speaker have amply shown, such variation manifests itself at every level of language use, such as phonology, lexicology, morphology, and syntax, and therefore, in terms of the acquisitional challenge facing the L2 learner, cannot be seen as a 'luxury' in foreign language learning which one can easily do without. Rather, studies of the native speaker have shown that such variation is a

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[2] For a presentation of state-of-the-art presentations on variation in L2 acquisition, see Bayley and Preston (1996), Preston (2000), Gass et al. (1989), and Young (1991, 1999).

fundamental feature of his/her language usage, whereby (s)he alternates between use of either variant depending on its appropriateness in context. That is to say, since one variant generally emerges as being more formal than the other less formal variant, the native speaker draws on his/her sociolinguistic knowledge to systematically vary his/her usage of either variant. Whilst the native speaker has already acquired that knowledge, the L2 learner has yet to acquire that ability to vary his/her use of different features of the L2 depending on their appropriateness in context. Indeed, failure to do so will result in considerable discrepancies with the native speaker, whereby the learner may underuse one variant, and, in so doing, overuse another variant which is inappropriate in context. Such inappropriate language use in sociolinguistic terms merely emphasizes the importance of understanding the process of development behind the learner's sociolinguistic competence, in order to avoid the situation of a learner whose language usage is structurally correct, but sociolinguistically inappropriate in context.

This paper aims to provide an insight into that process of acquisition in relation to the instructed L2 learner's sociolinguistic competence. Before presenting the study undertaken, the following section will present an overview of some of the principle findings emanating from previous studies in the area.

2.   Literature review

Previous studies of the L2 acquisition of sociolinguistic variation have typically focussed on learners of French, as seen in state-of-the-art collection of papers in Dewaele and Mougeon (2002, Mougeon and Dewaele 2004). Those studies have more typically focussed on sociolinguistic variation in relation to morphology, as exemplified by Dewaele (2002), Dewaele and Regan (2002), Lemée (2002), Nadasdi et al. (2003), Regan (1996) Rehner and Mougeon (1999), and Rehner et al. (2003). In contrast, sociolinguistic variation in the areas of phonology, lexicology, and syntax has been relatively less investigated, although notable exceptions include Blondeau and Nagy (1998), Dewaele and Regan (2001), Howard et al. (2004), Mougeon and Rehner (2001), Nadasdi and McKinnie (2003), Nagy et al. (1996), Sankoff et al. (1997), Thomas (2002), and Uritescu et al. (2004).

Such studies overwhelmingly point to the difficulty posed by the acquisition of sociolinguistic variation for the L2 learner, whereby the

learner typically overuses formal sociolinguistic markers, and, in so doing, underuses their corresponding informal markers. For example, Regan (1996) notes the quasi-total absence of 'ne' deletion in her expansive study of Irish instructed learners of French before a stay in the target language community. That is to say, the learners almost totally relied on the use of the formal variant for the expression of negation, in spite of the fact that that was the structurally more complex form. However, Regan notes that the learners' use of the informal variant dramatically increased during a period of residence in France, whereby she concludes that the acquisition of the informal variant was an important means of 'sounding more native-like' whilst in France, a factor which seems to have spurred its acquisition whilst there in a way that did not occur in the foreign language classroom. Indeed, in view of such a finding, the question arises as to what extent informal variants are present in classroom input, such that their presence may simply not be frequent enough for their acquisition to take place. That is to say, the classroom learner may not be adequately exposed to such informal variants, unlike in the target language community where naturalistic input seems to have a much greater impact. Indeed, on this score, Rehner et al. (2003) report on findings concerning the use of informal variants in foreign language textbooks and by L2 classroom instructors, whereby they find that on certain variables, the informal variant is less used than in the case of the native speaker.

Regan's finding concerning the limitations of the foreign language classroom for the acquisition of sociolinguistic variation has been reiterated in a range of other studies which have pointed towards the vital role played by authentic target language contact outside the foreign language classroom in order for the L2 learner to in any way approach native speaker norms. For example, a range of studies by Jean-Marc Dewaele (1992, 2002, 2003, 2004) on the acquisition of various sociolinguistic markers point to the increased usage of informal sociolinguistic markers by learners who have more increased informal contact with the target language outside the classroom such as through friends, TV viewing, reading, and holidays in France. In contrast, classroom learners whose L2 contact is more restricted to the classroom demonstrate increased usage of the more formal variants.

Similar findings concerning the importance of authentic native-speaker contact outside the classroom, as principally facilitated through a period of residence in the target language community are equally evident in a wide range of studies by Raymond Mougeon on Canadian anglophone learners of French in an immersion setting. Findings from such studies

further illustrate that, whilst informal variants such as 'ne' deletion are underused, vernacular variants are positively quasi-absent in the L2 learner's interlanguage. Such variants are defined as variants which have a more stigmatised value in the target language, and are typically associated with lower class speech.

In summary, previous studies overwhelmingly point to the limitations of the foreign language classroom for the acquisition of sociolinguistic variation, in contrast to the sociolinguistic gains enjoyed by classroom learners who spend a period of residence in the target language community. However, as noted by Nagy et al. (1996, Blondeau et al. 2003) in their studies of L2 naturalistic learners in the target language community, namely Canadian anglophone speakers residing in French-speaking Montreal, being in the target language community alone is often not a sufficient factor in order for the learner to approach native speaker norms. Whilst all the studies mentioned note that the L2 learner approaches native speaker norms, without fully reaching them, Nagy et al.'s work particularly points to the variation evident between learners in terms of their success rate, which chiefly reflects an effect for the learners' level of integration within the target language community, in terms of their interaction with native speakers.[3]

Whilst the studies reviewed point to a number of limitations on the L2 learner's potential acquisition of sociolinguistic competence, the studies nonetheless unilaterally point to the learner's success in acquiring a similar system of underlying factors as the native speaker which seem to systematically constrain his/her use of the such sociolinguistic markers. For example, studies of the native speaker unequivocally point to the systematic effect of a range of linguistic and extralinguistic factors on the speaker's choice of marker, such that his/her choice of sociolinguistic variant is not in any way random, but is rather subject to very systematic patterns of variation. Studies of the L2 learner equally point to very similar systematic patterns of variation, such that the learner's underlying system of sociolinguistic competence very neatly approaches native speaker norms. For example, studies of both the L2 learner and the native speaker point to the important effect of style, whereby use of informal variants is

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[3] See also Olson-Flanagan and Inal (1996) who find that length of residence in the target language community significantly affects the learner's level of use of informal variants. Regan (1995) similarly notes differences between her learners in terms of their sociolinguistic gains as a reflection on their level of contact with the target language whilst residing in the target language community.

much more frequent during an informal style than during a formal style.[4] Likewise, gender has been found to be an important factor in the speaker's choice of variant, whereby males use informal variants to a greater extent than females.

In summary, whilst somewhat restricted to studies of L2 French, the dominant findings emerging from previous sociolinguistic research as presented principally concern:

- the difficulty posed by the acquisition of sociolinguistic variation for classroom learners in terms of their very evident underuse of informal sociolinguistic markers.
- the relative underuse of vernacular markers by L2 learners.
- the highly beneficial effect of informal contact with the L2, chiefly through residence in the target language community, for the acquisition of informal sociolinguistic markers.
- the similarities between the native speaker and the L2 learner in the underlying system of factors constraining their sociolinguistic variation.

One of the limitations of the studies on which those findings are based concerns the fact that they have predominantly focused upon morphological variables in the case of L2 French, such as 'ne' deletion, as well as the variable use of 'nous' / 'on'. Whilst such studies of the same variable across different learner populations allow an important means of comparing findings, studies of socio-phonological variables in L2 French have been much less numerous. By focusing on the acquisition of a socio-phonological, the study to be presented here attempts to supplement existing findings concerning the acquisition of sociolinguistic variation, and in so doing, provide an insight into their validity in the case of the socio-phonological variable of liaison in L2 French.

3.   Liaison in target language French

Bybee (2001) provides the following definition of 'liaison': "the appearance of a word-final consonant before a vowel-initial word in words that in other contexts end in a vowel" (ibid: 337). Typically three types of liaison can be identified, obligatory (or categorical), facultative (or

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[4] However, see Rehner and Mougeon (1999) and Uritescu et al. (2004) who report opposing findings.

variable), and forbidden which can give rise to cases of hypercorrection, as exemplified respectively in:

(7)   *Les   enfants*
      the-plur children
      'the children'

(8)   *pendant une heure*
      for   one hour
      'for an hour'

(9)   *Charles a   parlé*
      Charles aux   speak-perf
      'Charles spoke'

Numerous studies present an insight into the use of the liaison by the native speaker, such as Ågren (1979), Armstrong (2001), Ashby (1981, 2003), Booij and De Jong (1987), Bybee (2001), Encrevé (1988), Gadet (1989), Green and Hintze (1988, 2001), Klausenberger (1984), Malécot (1975), Morin and Kaye (1982), and Smith (1998). These studies overwhelmingly point to the highly complex phenomenon that is use of the liaison in French, whereby, in the case of variable liaison, its use or non-use is conditioned by a range of linguistic and extralinguistic constraints. An example of such a linguistic constraint concerns, for example, the type of syntactic link holding between the word in which the liaison segment is to be found and the following word: for example, it has been found that use of the liaison is highly infrequent following polysyllabic prepositions such as 'pendant' (during), whereas its use is considerably more frequent following the verb 'être'. Other linguistic constraints include phonological factors such as the type of liaison segment itself: use of the liaison is much more frequent when the liaison segment is /n/ such as in 'nous sommes bien arrivés' (we got there safely), as compared to /t/ or /z/ such as in 'ils sont arrivés' (they arrived) and 'des personnes âgées' (old people). Its use is relatively rare in the case of /k/, /p/ and /r/, such as in 'suer sang et eau' (to sweat oceans), 'beaucoup aimé' (well liked) and 'visiter un château' (to visit a castle). The length of the actual words between which the liaison can be made has equally been found to have an effect on its use, whereby its use is much more frequent when the second word is relatively longer compared to the first, such as in 'je suis arrivé' (I arrived). In contrast, its

use is less frequent when the first word is longer than the second, such as in 'il cherchait un livre' (he was looking for a book).

Apart from linguistic factors, extralinguistic and stylistic factors have been found to condition use of the liaison. For example, as a prestige marker, Ashby (1981) finds that use of the liaison is more frequent during a formal style, and less so during an informal style. However, it is important to note that the issue of formality is not a simple two-way dichotomy between formal and informal markers. Rather, although constituting a formal marker, the various types of liaison cannot be considered to carry the same level of prestige. As Malécot makes the point, certain liaison types are more prestigious than others, only occurring in very formal styles such as a formal speech as opposed to a general conversation where their occurrence is somewhat less frequent. Such highly prestigious liaisons are exemplified, for example, by the infinitive verb form as in 'discuter avec' (to discuss with). Thus, in view of differences in their level of occurrence according to the level of formality, all liaison types are not equal in terms of the level of prestige that they carry. Rather, some are seen to be more prestigious than others, such that style emerges as a very important factor in the native speaker's use of the liaison.

In the case of extralinguistic factors, middle class and older speakers have been found to produce the liaison more frequently than their lower class and younger counterparts. In the case of gender, findings have been mixed: whereas Ashby (1981, 2003) and Green and Hintze (2002) find that use of the liaison is more frequent in men than women, Booij and De Jong (1987) and Malécot (1975) offer opposing findings, whilst Smith (1998) finds no differences between men and women on their use of this variable. A final factor which has been relatively uninvestigated is the issue of how use of the liaison may be geographically constrained. A difficulty with this factor concerns the limited number of studies available, whereby some focus solely on the discourse of media presenters and politicians. Geographical comparisons are further restricted due to other important methodological differences between studies. For example, studies differ in terms of whether they report solely on variable liaison, or on both obligatory and variable liaison together, thus making it difficult to compare levels of use of the liaison in different geographical areas. Further difficulties relate to differences between the informants in the different studies in terms of their age and social background, amongst others.

The range of factors which have been found to condition use of the liaison points to a number of highly complex patterns of variation at work

behind this variable, whereby the acquisitional challenge for L2 learners is not only to learn to vary in their use of this variable, but also, if they are to approach native speaker norms, to learn to vary that usage in similar ways to the native speaker according to the patterns of variation outlined. That task is perhaps made all the more difficult given that cases of hypercorrect use of the liaison are equally highly frequent across native speakers from diverse backgrounds! The study to be presented here attempts to illuminate that acquisitional challenge facing the L2 learner in relation to the acquisition of the liaison in target language French.

4.   Presentation of the study

4.1 Learners

This preliminary study is based on a large-scale project which investigates the acquisition of French by Hiberno-English-speaking learners of French. Previous investigations have focused on their grammatical skills, principally in relation to their acquisition of tense-aspect morphology.[5] In contrast, the study from which this paper emanates aims to illuminate the learners' acquisition of sociolinguistic skills in target language French. The study further complements a number of other studies which have been carried out in relation to a range of sociolinguistic variables in the areas of phonology, morphology, and syntax.[6] The project therefore provides a wealth of information on the second language acquisition process experienced by Irish learners of French across a range of grammatical and sociolinguistic skills.

For the purposes of the preliminary study to be presented here, data were analysed from a relatively small cohort of six classroom learners. However, similar social characteristics across the learners in terms of their learner profiles, as outlined in the following, ensured that the sample is relatively homogenous. They were Irish university learners of French who had been learning French for 5–6 years at high school, before specialising in French as part of their undergraduate degree programme at university, where, at the time of the study, they had been learning French for two years. Given the learners' sociobiographical characteristics in terms of the

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[5] For specific studies, see Howard (2000, 2001, 2002a, 2002b, 2002c, 2003, 2004a, 2004b).

[6] See, for example, Howard et al. (2004), Lemée (2002), Regan (2002, 2003).

length of time they had been learning French, their reasons for learning French, as well as context of learning, the learners can be classed as advanced instructed learners, as defined by Bartning (1997).[7] The characteristics of their language use equally point to such a classification insofar as the target language forms were no longer emerging in their interlanguage, but rather had emerged.

The learners' programme of study at high school was based on a communicative method as outlined in the national language curriculum in Ireland. The guidelines outlined in the curriculum prescribed a task-based approach using the target language as a means of interaction in the classroom. As part of their language assessment at high school, the learners were tested on the four language skills. All the learners had also studied Irish for 13–14 years during their pre-university schooling, although none reported using the language on a regular basis. It is noteworthy that there is no potential effect for this language on the learners' use of the variable under investigation here, since liaison is not a feature of Irish, or of English for that matter.

In relation to their university programme of study in French, the learners had, on average, 7 contact hours per week, which were divided between both language and content courses in the areas of French literature and culture. A communicative approach was also an integral characteristic of the learners' course of instruction at university: the language of teaching was predominantly French on both the language and content courses being followed by the learners. In the case of their language programme in French which was spread annually over 24 weeks, the learners followed a weekly one-hour informal conversation class, as well as classes on written French. The use of authentic materials was dominant in both classes. As noted earlier, the students also followed a range of content courses in French literature and culture, such that they had access to other sources of input outside of their formal language classes. Access to authentic sources of input was also facilitated through multimedia resources.

4.2 Data elicitation

For the purposes of this study, the data analysed stem from individual sociolinguistic interviews with the learners at the end of their second year of university studies. Each interview typically lasted one hour, and was

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[7] See also Howard (1998, 1999).

conducted in a university office with the researcher, who demonstrated near-native competence in the target language. The learner-informants had had no previous contact with the researcher. Whilst the learners, who provided of their services freely, knew that they were participating in a research project, they were not in any way aware of the purposes of the project.

The interviews, which were recorded using a Coomber recorder, followed the guidelines proposed by Labov (1984) for the elicitation of natural spontaneous discourse. The network of conversational modules were suitably adapted to match the interests of the learner-informants, and included both formal and informal topics, such as family, pastimes, holidays, visits to France, studies, career, religion, Ireland and France, as well as Labov's famous danger of death module. Considerable time was spent on developing the interview questions with a view to minimalising any effect for the formality which the learners may at first have approached the interviews. The interviews can therefore be considered to be relatively informal, as attested by various channel cues such as laughter and speech rate. However, the inclusion of both formal and informal conversational modules ensured that a range of speech styles was elicited. Since use of the variable liaison is closely linked to the issue of style, this was imperative with a view to capturing how the learners' use of the variable might differ across styles.

Following their elicitation, the data were transcribed into standard orthography following the transcription conventions proposed by Blanche-Benveniste and Jeanjean (1987).

4.3   Data analysis

For the purposes of this paper, all tokens of liaison contexts were extracted from the data, yielding a total of 962 tokens, which were subsequently coded as part of a variationist analysis of the variable use of the liaison by advanced L2 learners in target language. Whilst those tokens naturally included cases of variable liaison, they also included cases of categorical liaison, since in the case of the L2 learner, supposedly categorical liaison was not as categorical as one might expect, but rather was also subject to considerable variation. However, we did not include cases of hypercorrect or forbidden liaisons which the learners, in the main, did not produce at all. Even in those singular cases where such liaisons occurred, they can perhaps be considered more properly as 'slips of the tongue' as opposed to the

native speaker's attempt at creating the effect of prestige. Whilst a range of linguistic, extralinguistic, and stylistic factors have been proposed as constraints on that variation, as noted previously, given space restrictions, the results presented here will wholly concentrate on the effect of syntactic context on the learners' use of this variable. The results are based on a quantitative analysis which attempts to identify whether certain syntactic contexts constitute more favourable contexts for use of the liaison than others. Examples of the range of both obligatory (10)–(14) and variable (15)–(24) contexts within which use of the liaison was examined are exemplified in the following:

(10)   Article + noun: les enfants (the children)

(11)   Clitic pronoun + verb: ils ont parlé (they spoke)

(12)   following a monosyllabic adverb + modified element: très intéressant (very interesting)

(13)   following a monosyllabic preposition: dans un instant (in a moment)

(14)   within a lexicalised chunk: de temps en temps (from time to time)

(15)   following quand (non-interrogative): quand ils parlaient (when they were speaking)

(16)   following a polysyllabic adverb + modified element: nous nous sommes beaucoup amusés (we had great fun)

(17)   following a polysyllabic preposition: pendant une heure (for an hour)

(18)   following être (non-auxiliary): c'est intéressant (it is interesting)

(19)   noun + adjective: des enfants aimables (friendly children)

(20)   following a monosyllabic auxiliary: ils sont arrivés (they arrived)

(21)   following a polysyllabic auxiliary: vous avez entendu (you heard)

(22)   following a negative particle: ils ne sont pas arrivés (they did not arrive)

(23)   verb + complement: nous lisons un livre (we are reading a book)

(24)   noun + verb: les gens entendaient mal (people heard with difficulty)

5.   Results

Before discussing the learners' use of the liaison across the range of syntactic contexts, it is firstly important to consider the learners' general

level of use of the liaison in both obligatory and variable contexts. On this score, the rate of usage of the liaison was found to be 82.2% in obligatory contexts (t = 2.452; p < 0.05), and 8.2% in variable contexts (t = 4.7; p < 0.05). Whilst use of obligatory liaison is considerably more frequent than that of variable use, the rate of use nonetheless indicates that the learners diverge somewhat from the native speaker who produces the liaison in such contexts in a more categorical way. Similarly, differences between the learners and the native speaker are also evident in the case of variable liaison, whereby the learners' level of usage is significantly lower than in the case of the native speaker who has most recently been seen by Ashby (2003) to attain a rate of usage of 28%. Such findings concerning our learners' level of use of the liaison alone already point to the considerable progress that remains to be made by the learners in order for them to approach the native speaker norms described by Ashby. It remains for us to consider whether differences equally emerge concerning the issue of how the learners use the liaison in different syntactic contexts. For the purposes of examining this issue, we will firstly consider the findings in relation to obligatory contexts for use of the liaison, and subsequently in relation to variable contexts.

5.1 Obligatory contexts

The following table indicates the individual learners' level of use of the liaison in obligatory contexts.

Learner Syntactic Context	1		2		3		4		5		6	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Article + noun	50	96	23	70	19	70	33	94	62	95	31	97
Subject pronoun + verb	10	100	25	93	7	100	12	92	34	100	20	80
Monosyllabic preposition	12	100	9	82	8	73	7	78	28	96	6	75
Monosyllabic adverb	2	22	3	25	0	0	2	100	4	100	2	33
Lexicalised form	5	50	2	40	7	44	1	50	8	61	1	50
Adjective + noun	1	50	0	0	0	0	-	-	0	0	0	0
Object pronoun	1	50	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

Table 1. Level of usage of the liaison across obligatory contexts

The results clearly indicate that use of obligatory liaison is not in any way a uniform phenomenon, but rather its usage by the learners differs considerably depending on the syntactic context. In particular, we note that use of the liaison is favoured between articles and nouns, between subject pronouns and verbs, and following monosyllabic prepositions, where in the case of some learners, levels of use of the liaison approach near-categorical levels. In contrast, the remaining contexts seem to pose considerably more difficulty to the learners, to the extent that use of the liaison is completely absent in some contexts, such as between adjectives and nouns and following an object pronoun. It is interesting to note that use of the liaison is not as extensive as one might expect in the case of lexicalised forms, which are typically considered to be learnt as rote forms. This finding is in contrast with findings from other studies concerning the important role played by lexicalised chunks on the acquisition of sociolinguistic markers. For example, Regan (1995, 1997) notes that such markers tend to be greatly overused with such forms in contrast to non-lexicalised forms.

5.2 Variable contexts

The following table presents the results concerning the learners' use of the liaison in variable contexts.

Learner	1		2		3		4		5		6	
Context	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
'quand'	-	-	0	0	-	-	0	0	0	0	0	0
Polysyllabic adverb	-	-	-	-	-	-	0	0	0	0	0	0
Polysyllabic preposition	-	-	-	-	0	0	0	0	1	100	0	0
'être'	1	4	0	0	0	0	1	11	6	21	0	0
Noun + adjective	1	33	0	0	-	-	0	0	0	0	0	0
Monosyllabic auxiliary	1	50	6	66	3	60	1	100	0	0	0	0
Negative particle	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	16	0	0
Verb + complement	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	3
Polysyllabic auxiliary	-	-	0	0	-	-	0	0	0	0	0	0
Noun + verb	-	-	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Conjunction	2	18	1	8	0	0	2	17	0	0	0	0

Table 2. Level of usage of the liaison across the variable contexts

Somewhat in contrast to the preceding table concerning obligatory liaison, the overwhelming feature to emerge from this table is the learners' complete failure to produce the liaison in the vast majority of variable contexts where it could be produced. Indeed, contexts where the variable liaison is produced are restricted to polysyllabic prepositions, the verb 'être', between nouns and adjectives, after a monosyllabic auxiliary, following a negative particle, and following a conjunction. Whilst some of

the learners produce the liaison in these contexts, it is nonetheless to be noted that other learners do not produce the liaison at all. This in spite of the fact that such contexts have been found, in the case of the native speaker, to favour use of the variable liaison, albeit not to a categorical extent. For example, in the case of his study of native speakers in Tours, Ashby (2003) reports a rate of usage of the liaison of 33% following the verb 'être', and of 85% following 'quand'. Such levels of use of the liaison are significantly higher than those presented in Table 3 for our advanced L2 learners. In contrast, however, Ashby's results show that the native speaker's use of the variable liaison is somewhat lower at 5% in other cases such as after polysyllabic prepositions and adverbs, and between nouns and adjectives. Nonetheless, in contrast to the native speaker, these are curiously contexts where some of our learners neglect to produce the liaison at all. In contrast with obligatory contexts where the learners make much greater use of the liaison, variable contexts pose considerably greater difficulty, insofar as the learners' non-use of the liaison would suggest that they may not yet have perceived of such contexts as contexts of potential use of the liaison at all. In contrast, the stark difference between the learners' realisation of the liaison in both context types suggests that the learners first perceive obligatory contexts as contexts of use of the liaison in a way that variable contexts have yet to be acquired.

6.   Discussion and conclusions

By focusing on an investigation of a socio-phonological marker, the study presented here aimed to complement recent research on the acquisition of sociolinguistic variation which has predominantly been based on a range of morpho-syntactic variables. Results of the study further corroborate a number of the principle findings emanating from such research, and, as such, lend support to their validity across a range of sociolinguistic markers. In relation to the issue of language acquisition, one of the principle findings concerns the limitations of the foreign classroom for the development of the L2 learner's sociolinguistic competence. This has been seen to be very much true in the case of learners from a range of language backgrounds learning a range of second languages. In the case of our classroom learners, our findings have principally noted the relative underuse of obligatory liaisons, as well as the significantly lower usage of variable liaisons compared to the native speaker. In particular, in relation to this latter finding, our results show that, although they have been learning

French for a number of years, and can be classed as 'advanced' instructed learners as previously outlined in Bartning's terms, the learners have significant progress to make on the acquisition of sociolinguistic variation. The difficulty which that task poses to the learner is further emphasized in the fact that the learner shows significantly higher use of obligatory liaison than of the variable liaison, suggesting that more categorical markers of the L2 are more easily acquired than variable markers.

Whilst our results corroborate existing findings on the acquisition of sociolinguistic variation from the point of view of the limitations of the foreign language classroom, they nonetheless differ in relation to another general finding: whereas existing research generally points to the similarities existing between the learner's patterns of use of sociolinguistic markers and those of the native speaker, our findings which are restricted to the use of the liaison in different syntactic contexts do not provide such support. Rather, our findings show that use of the liaison by both the learner and the native speaker is not uniform to the point that its use by the learner is non-existent in some contexts. Further, even when it is used, those contexts (dis)favouring its use are not the same as in the case of the native speaker.

A possible explanation for such a finding, however, may relate to the learner population under investigation: previous studies which in their findings have emphasized the similarities in how learners and native speakers alike use sociolinguistic markers have chiefly been based on learners who have spent a period of residence in the target language community, or are learning in an immersion context.[8] Such residence in the target language community, or immersion learning, may constitute an important means of unconsciously sensitising the learner to those contexts which (dis)favour use of the particular variable. Furthermore, as already noted, those studies have been based on morphological variables, use of which may in some ways be more easily noticeable to the learner. In contrast, the study on which our findings are based has investigated learners in the foreign language classroom, which as a domain of acquisition seems not to provide sufficient input for the learner to subconsciously realise which contexts (dis)favour use of the variable.

A further point concerns the fact that the findings of previous studies are based on analyses of data elicited when their learner-informants' sociolinguistic competence may be more developed than in the case of our

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[8] See, in particular, Regan (1995, 1996).

learners. That is to say, in the case of our learners, results show that their use of the variable liaison is relatively insignificant compared to the native speaker, such that during the early stages of emergence of sociolinguistic variation, the characteristics of use of a particular marker by the learner may be at odds with that of the native speaker. Such an interpretation of the results, however, should be further investigated in studies which focus less on sociolinguistic variables which have already emerged in the learner's language than on the characteristics of their emergence over time. Such an issue could be interestingly investigated in research on a larger-scale involving learners of other L1 backgrounds.

Whilst results of the study overwhelmingly corroborate previous studies which point to the limitations of the foreign language classroom for the acquisition of sociolinguistic variation, the study differs from previous studies in a further important respect: whereas other studies have investigated the acquisition of informal variants, the formal variant being already emerged in the learner's language, our study has investigated a variable whose acquisition has a somewhat opposing starting point. That is to say, in the case of the variable liaison, use of the formal variant is almost absent from the learner's language, but rather it is the informal variant which is present, and manifests itself in terms of the non-use of the liaison. Therefore, our learners' limited use of the variable liaison may give rise to an overly informal quality in their speech, which contrasts with their use of other more formal variants which previous studies have shown the classroom learner to overuse, such as the use of the negative particle 'ne', and subject pronoun 'nous'. However, whilst there is a tendency for researchers to categorize formal variants together, it is possible that the L2 learner, and also their interlocutors, may perceive use of certain formal markers to be more marked than others. That is to say, the formal variants of different variables may in fact be perceived to differ in terms of the relative degree of formality that they assume, such that they cannot be considered to be all equally formal. For example, it may be the case that, from the learner's perspective, the omission of the variable liaison may be a less informal use than the omission of the negative particle 'ne' or use of 'tu' instead of 'vous'. A second area for future research therefore concerns the need to consider how the L2 learner's perception of use of the liaison may differ from other formal variants.

An alternative interpretation of the overuse of such formal variants, which contrasts with our learners' underuse of the variable liaison, concerns the pedagogical requirements placed upon the foreign language

classroom as a domain of acquisition, requirements which are often seen as limiting the learner's opportunities to use informal variants. For example, the classroom is seen as a formal environment where interaction is typically restricted to formal discourse, and where the relationship between the instructor and learner is equally formal. As such, an invitation to demonstrate their use of informal discourse is often not forthcoming, such that it is perhaps not surprising that previous studies note that instructed learners grossly underuse informal variants in favour of formal ones—why would they do otherwise if they are implicitly not encouraged to do so?

However, due to the characteristics of the variable investigated here, results from this study suggest that the picture is perhaps more complicated than one might have thought. In the case of the acquisition of variable liaison, use of the informal variant seems to precede use of the formal variant, as evident in our learners' gross underuse of the liaison in some contexts, and total non-use of the liaison in other contexts such that it is the informal variant that overwhelmingly dominates. Thus, in contrast with the interpretation of previous studies' results which holds that it is the specificity of the foreign language classroom as a domain of acquisition which favours the acquisition of formal variants, and in so doing, negatively impacts on the acquisition of informal variants, our results nonetheless point to the need for attention to be paid to use of the formal variants in the foreign language classroom, at least where the liaison is concerned. For example, there is considerable scope for future research to illuminate the sociolinguistic characteristics of the classroom input with a view to examining how the instructor's use of the liaison may differ from that of the native speaker, such that the instructor's potential underuse of this variable may be reflected in the L2 learner.

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